



Connecticut Department of
**ENERGY &
ENVIRONMENTAL
PROTECTION**

**STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

Public Hearing – March 8, 2013
Environment Committee

Testimony Submitted by Commissioner Daniel C. Esty
Presented By Deputy Commissioner Susan Whalen

Raised House Bill No. 6541 – AN ACT CONCERNING ON-LINE EDUCATION OPTIONS FOR BOATING AND HUNTING SAFETY

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding Raised House Bill No. 6541 – On-Line Education Options For Boating And Hunting Safety. The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) offers the following testimony.

We appreciate the Committee's willingness to raise this bill at the request of the DEEP. With respect to basic safe-boating courses we strongly support this proposal, which would allow the Commissioner to approve online basic safe-boating courses that lead to certification. Such online courses would be coexistent and competitive with approved classroom courses. Secondly, with respect to firearms handling and hunting safety DEEP strongly supports this proposal, which would greatly increase opportunities for training in safe firearms handling and hunting safety through on-line education services provided by private vendors while reducing costs to DEEP by removing current prohibitions that do not allow vendors to charge fees.

Boater Safety

DEEP supports this proposal with respect to basic safe-boating courses for several reasons. First, passage of this bill will provide increased flexibility and options to the resident boater and out-of-state personal watercraft operator who are mandated to take a basic boating safety course to operate in Connecticut. Second, passage of this bill will enable DEEP to present, to any person with a computer, timely basic safe boating education that meets most American with Disability Act needs. Third, passage of this bill will allow DEEP to complete a LEAN initiative, to evolve our role from education provider to education overseer, as the general statutes provide, allowing for the reallocation of scarce fiscal and staff resources within the Boating Division to meet emerging needs.

Passage of this proposal results in no adverse impact but reduces the administrative burden to DEEP. In addition, it is anticipated to benefit the private companies that are teaching the classroom course, as we release the approximately 5,000 students that we teach annually. While some students may avail themselves of the online opportunity, we expect that many students will still want a classroom setting.

While boaters have asked for an online option, opposition to online education has been voiced by some classroom course providers. Such providers have opined that an online course cannot provide the same personal contact as is available in a classroom. Until recently, prior to the evolution of the “managed course”, we would be inclined to agree. A managed online course is one where students must spend an allotted amount of time on each web page and are unable to skip content to go directly to the end of the chapter quizzes. Newer managed courses also allow students to read and hear the text being read as well as see animations or real video illustrating complex boating concepts.

In a recent study, the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators conducted a comparative retention study between classroom and online taught students to gauge how much information was remembered after taking a course. The study showed that both groups retained important practical data and no changes were recommended to the national education standards for online courses, indicating that the efficacy of managed online courses is on par with classroom courses.

DEEP’s proposed approach to provide an online class option is supported by the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA), which sets the national education standards for basic boating classes that lead to certification, including online courses. Only NASBLA approved online courses would be considered for approval by the Commissioner. In doing so, we would join over 84% of the states that already utilize online boating safety courses.

If you would like to experience a Connecticut specific online boating course, an unofficial version is available for use at www.boaterexam.com/usa/connecticut/. While this is not yet set up as a managed course, it provides insight to what will be available as an online selection.

Hunter Safety

Additionally, DEEP strongly supports this proposal with respect to firearms handling and hunting safety courses for several reasons. All new hunters are required to successfully complete a course of instruction in firearms or archery hunting before they can be issued a hunting license. Online learning, when coupled with a hands-on field-day learning session, is a proven effective method to enhance hunter safety training. Under existing law, no fee shall be charged for such courses. However, recent advances in web-based learning have resulted in several commercial vendors providing high-quality, on-line training options. As commercial products, each of these offerings is available at a nominal fee. By virtue of the fee, the DEEP is currently barred from recognizing certificates of completion offered through these venues. Consequently, prospective students are unable to take advantage of these offerings and must instead attend multiple in-classroom courses, frequently several miles from home. Travel to and from in-classroom courses demands substantially greater commitments of time and cost. Similarly, transitioning to on-line learning services reduces costs to the state by reducing the number of on-site classes. It will also facilitate the redeployment of volunteer instructor services to hands-on learning sessions in the handling of firearms and archery equipment.

Ten of the thirteen northeastern states, including Massachusetts, New York, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Vermont and Pennsylvania, accept certificates of completion of on-line courses. Like the program intended for Connecticut, all ten northeastern states require a one-day field component in addition to the on-line course.

By removing the prohibition on charging fees, the DEEP will be able to accept certificates of completion, reduce administrative costs to the agency, and reduce travel costs to the students, while continuing to offer free course options through volunteer instructors.

In conclusion, DEEP strongly supports on-line basic safe-boating, firearms handling and hunting safety education, which have evolved in recent years, and DEEP recognizes that such an approach is now commonplace in all other areas of education. DEEP is poised to meet this growing demand for on-line education and provide an option that lets the consumer decide which is best for their needs. The bottom line is that on-line education has been demonstrated to deliver the safety knowledge demanded by DEEP. Our goal is to improve the safety of recreational activities by allowing more on-line education opportunities.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this proposal. If you should require any additional information, please contact DEEP's legislative liaison, Robert LaFrance at 860-424-3401 or Robert.LaFrance@ct.gov.

